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Britain: Education workers teach Tories and Starmer the bleeding obvious

Friday 8 January 2021, by [STOWE Andy](#) (Date first published: 5 January 2021).

Last week the National Education Union (NEU) [1] represented about 450 000 teaching assistants, learning mentors, premises staff, office workers and teachers in schools and colleges in England and Wales writes Andy Stowe.

Over the last few days, it has gained an estimated 16 000 new members. On Sunday its joint general secretaries Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney led an online briefing and discussion for members which had 400 000 participants.

More than any other union or political party in England, the NEU has been setting out the right ideas on how the pandemic can be managed so that its impact on children and families can be minimised. This was starkly demonstrated on Monday January 5th when both the Tory government and Labour leader Keir Starmer were grudgingly obliged to support the course of action that the union had been calling for from early December, a total closure of schools in England for all children other than those of key workers and the most vulnerable.

Real leadership

Parents and children had gone to bed on Sunday night having been told on national TV that morning by Johnson that most of them should go to school if these weren't in an apparently random selection of local authorities. Starmer, whose default position on everything from Brexit to displaying the union jack to pandemic control is to support the Tories was saying pretty much the same thing.

At the Sunday meeting the union leaders had advised members in primary schools to use their legal right not to go into work if they felt that the premises were unsafe. In December, the union had been calling for schools to be closed at the start of the new term in January as a means of lowering infections. The reason for doing so was obvious. The new virus variant was far more contagious and even if it was unusual for children to become very unwell, they would spread the disease to family members, staff and family members of adults working in schools. Virtually every education worker now knows someone who has died or become gravely ill due to contracting the virus in a school.

Unlike the Tory commentators who have suddenly become gravely worried about children's mental health and lack of access to broadband and a decent laptop at home, the NEU and its members have long been raising concerns about these issues. Even before the pandemic it was taking months for children to get access to a preliminary mental health assessment and this was a direct consequence of Tory funding choices. The 2019 Labour manifesto was ridiculed by these same people for offering universal internet access and a few months later we all learned how indispensable this was.

Through mobilising its members online, having a clear set of demands which were manifestly in the interests of children and public health and a highly effective media strategy, the NEU has won a major victory for its members and wider society. It has shown Labour what real leadership looks

like.

Andy Stowe

P.S.

- Socialist Resistance. Posted on 5th January 2021:
<https://socialistresistance.org/education-workers-teach-tories-and-starmer-the-bleeding-obvious>
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Footnotes

[1] <https://neu.org.uk/>